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ABSTRACT

This study compared the psychosocial adjustment and social behavior of children from divorced or separated single-parent families with that of children from two-parent families. The theory of attachment was adopted as the conceptual framework for the study because of similarities between the behavioral response of children to parental separation (as reported in the clinical literature) and that of young children to separation from an attachment figure. Observations were made of the gaze direction, proxemic, tactile and verbal behavior of 38 children (19 single-parent and 19 two-parent) between 8 and 12 years old in classroom settings. Psychosocial adjustment was rated by classroom teachers. Teachers rated single-parent children as being more "academically disabled" than two-parent children and results of univariate analysis of gaze direction behavior suggest that two-parent children may adapt more successfully to the shifting demands of the classroom than single-parent children. Multivariate analysis of the behavioral data found significant main effects for age and sex but not for family status. A significant interaction effect on children's verbal behavior with male peers was found for family status and age during periods of social interaction. During non-academic time periods older single-parent children of both sexes contacted and spent more time in dyadic conversation with male peers than older two-parent children. Differences were also noted in the patterns of correlations between teacher ratings of academic disability and observations of the children's behavior. These findings are discussed in relation to attachment theory, peer relations and the academic performance of single-parent children. (Author/RH)

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CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF SINGLE- AND TWO - PARENT CHILDREN

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This study compared the social behavior and psychosocial adjustment of single-parent children with that of two-parent children. There were two main questions: first, are there differences in the classroom behavior of single- and two-parent children? And second, do single-parent children differ from two-parent children in their overall psychosocial adjustment within the school setting? Utilizing attachment theory as the conceptual framework classroom observations were made on the gaze direction, proxemic, tactile and verbal behavior of 19 single-parent and 19 two-parent children. Data on the children's psychosocial adjustment were obtained by having their teachers rate them on the Louisville School Behavior Checklist (Miller, 1974). The children were between the ages of 8 and 12, from upper middle class families and were matched on age, sex and classroom. There were 10 boys and 9 girls in each group and with the exception of one boy, all the single-parent children had lived in a two-parent family for more than five years. The single-parent families were all headed by mothers, and mean number of months since parental separation was 36.

Significant differences between the two groups of children were found in both their classroom behavior and their psychosocial adjustment. There were significant differences in their gaze direction behavior and in their verbal behavior. Single-parent children contacted and spent more time than two-parent children in Dyadic conversation with male peers during non-academic

time segments. Teachers rated single-parent children as being significantly more academically disabled than two-parent children and differences were also noted in the patterns of correlations between teacher ratings of academic disability and observations of the children's behavior.

Research concerning the effects of single-parent family life on children's development suffers from a number of methodological inadequacies: a deviancy model prevails in which single-parent children are considered an "at risk" population (Anthony, 1974). Often studies do not include control groups and there is an absence of a cohesive conceptual framework for the interpretation of results and for the integration of data from clinical with that from non-clinical studies. However, the greatest need is for observations of single-parent children in natural settings: how do they differ from children living in two-parent families?

Although a number of studies exist which point to the lowered academic performance of single-parent children, (Shinn, 1978), there is a dearth of studies concerned with classroom processes involving single-parent children including both teacher and peer interactions. One reason for this absence of studies may be the lack of a theoretical framework to bridge the gap between disruptions in the child's family relations and the child's classroom behavior. The heuristic value of attachment theory as a conceptual framework for the study of single-parent children was realized after similarities were noted in the literature between children's behavioral responses to parental separation (Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975, 1976), and the responses of young children to an unwilling separation from an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1961, 1977). In addition, it was reasoned that parental separation or divorce would result in some degree of disruption in a child's attachment relationship with the parent leaving the family household.

From a life span perspective, attachment was perceived as an organization of behavioral systems enabling the individual to achieve a balance between exploring the environment and maintaining close contact with another person (Ainsworth, Bell and Stayton, 1974; Sroufe, 1977). Preliminary classroom observations revealed four dimensions of behavior which seemed to reflect differences among children in promoting and maintaining interpersonal contact, and an observation schedule was devised to record children's gaze direction, proxemic, tactile and verbal behavior involving others, both teachers and peers. There were 24 specific behaviors recorded in these four categories (Appendix A). The location of the child in the classroom and the activity in which the child was engaged were also coded for each observation and the setting definitions in Appendix A represent the five combinations of location and activity within which 91% of the observations occurred. Each child was observed an average of 46 times for a total of 1748 one-minute observations. Observations were made by 4 trained observers who were unaware of the child's family status. Since the demands placed on the children varied according to location and activity, analysis of the observational data was conducted according to setting.

Results of the univariate analysis of the children's gaze direction behavior showed significant differences between single- and two-parent children in three settings. In setting 3, Rug location with single material activity, two-parent children were observed to direct their gaze significantly more than single-parent children toward the academic material at hand with a head down position, the expected behavior for this setting, $F(1,20) = 4.22$, $p < .05$. In Setting 2, Rug location with teacher focus activity, two-parent children were observed to direct their gaze significantly more than single-parent

children toward the target of 'non-specific other' with a head down positon, $F(1.36) = 6.09$, $p < .01$. In this setting, gazing down and away from the crowded surroundings was considered adaptive in that it allowed the child to continue listening to the teacher while screening out stimuli from the immediate environment. Two parent children used this strategy significantly more than did single-parent children. In Setting 5, when the children were at their seats engaged in an academic assignment, single-parent children were observed to direct their gaze significantly more than two-parent children toward a teacher, $F(1,36) = 5.21$, $p < .05$.

These differences in the children's gaze direction behavior need to be considered in light of the instructional procedures which characterized these classrooms. In the classrooms in which this study was conducted a great deal of emphasis was placed on children exhibiting the appropriate gaze direction behavior for the activity in which they were engaged. Children were consistently reinforced verbally for gazing at the appropriate target. These results seem to suggest that single-parent children were less able than two-parent children to modify their gaze direction behavior to meet the shifting demands of the classroom situation and direct their gaze toward the appropriate target.

Comparisons of the children's proxemic and tactile behavior showed no significant differences between the two groups with both single-parent and two-parent children exhibiting strong same sex peer preferences. Significant differences were found in their verbal behavior, however., In Setting 1, patio location with non-academic activity, single-parent children were found to have significantly more dyadic conversations, $F(1,36) = 4.24$, $p < .05$, and to spend significantly more time in dyadic conversations with male peers, $F(1,36) = 4.71$, $p < .05$, than were two-parent children.

On the basis of the univariate results indicating strong preferences for all the children to interact with peers of the same sex in most settings, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine the relative effects of age, sex and family status on the children's behavior. Results of the multivariate analysis showed a significant age x family status interaction effect on children's verbal behavior in Setting 1. During non-academic time periods, older single-parent children of both sexes had more dyadic conversations with male peers ($p < .003$) and spent more time in dyadic conversation with male peers ($p < .02$) than older two-parent children.

Regarding the children's psychosocial adjustment, teachers rated single-parent children as being significantly more maladjusted than two-parent children on only one subscale of the Louisville School Behavior Checklist, that of Academic Disability ($p < .01$). The relationship between children's Academic Disability Rating and their classroom behavior was also examined. Pearson Product moment correlations were computed on Academic Disability ratings and the children's behavior combined across all settings and are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Correlations Between Academic Disability Ratings on the Louisville School Behavior Checklist and Classroom Behaviors Across All Settings

(Means per observation)

Behavior	Single-Parent			Two-Parent		
	M	r	p	M	r	p
Gaze Direction						
Material, head up	.25	-.45	.02	.22	-.58	.004
Material, head down	.26	.12	.30	.31	-.27	.12
Peer	.19	.17	.24	.18	-.21	.18
Teacher	.09	-.03	.44	.07	.10	.33
Non-spec./other, head up	.18	.24	.15	.18	-.14	.27
Non-spec./other, head down	.01	-.03	.43	.02	-.02	.46
Proxemic Behavior						
Male peers, close proximity	.82	-.42	.03	.68	.01	.46
Female peers, close proximity	.85	.11	.32	.04	-.02	.45
Teachers, close proximity	.06	.41	.03	.06	.30	.10
Male peers, close proximity in view	.60	-.39	.04	.50	.06	.39
Female peers, close proximity in view	.65	.08	.35	.75	-.08	.37
Teachers, close proximity in view	.04	.31	.09	.05	.37	.05
Tactile Behavior						
Male Peer, active	.08	-.40	.04	.11	.21	.18
Female peer, active	.12	.29	.11	.12	-.14	.27
Male peer, passive	.20	-.34	.07	.19	.09	.35
Female peer, passive	.20	.11	.32	.22	-.03	.43
Verbal Behavior						
Short verbal statements	.66	-.08	.39	.65	.24	.15
Dyadic, Male peer	.14	-.43	.03	.08	-.08	.37
Dyadic, Female peer	.12	.20	.19	.13	-.11	.32
Dyadic, teachers	.02	.25	.14	.01	.55	.007
Total seconds, dyadic male peer	2.90	-.45	.02	1.63	-.04	.43
Total seconds, dyadic female peer	2.35	.04	.43	2.90	-.10	.33
Total seconds, dyadic teacher	.37	.11	.31	.23	.45	.02
Total seconds, group conversation	2.27	.32	.08	1.85	-.10	.33

For single-parent children there were significant correlations between Academic Disability rating and five categories of behavior involving one-to-one contact with male peers: (1) number of male peers in close proximity ($r = -.42$, $p < .03$), (2) number of male peers in close proximity in view of the focal child ($r = -.39$, $p < .04$), (3) amount of active touch involving a male peer ($r = -.40$, $p < .04$), (4) number of dyadic conversations with a male peer ($r = -.43$, $p < .04$), and (5) total number of seconds engaged in dyadic conversation with a male peer ($r = -.45$, $p < .02$). In other words, as the frequency of proxemic, tactile and verbal contact with male peers decreased, Academic Disability rating increased for single-parent children.

For two-parent children, significant positive correlations were found between Academic Disability ratings and three categories of behavior involving teachers: (1) number of teachers in close proximity in view of the focal subject ($r = .37$, $p < .05$), (2) number of times engaged in dyadic conversation with a teacher ($r = .55$, $p < .007$), and (3) total number of seconds spent in dyadic converation with a teacher ($r = .45$, $p < .02$). These correlations indicate that as teacher rating of two-parent children's Academic Disability increased, so did both their proxemic and verbal contact with these children.

These findings will be discussed in relation to attachment theory, peer relations and the Academic Performance of single-parent children. Results indicating that single-parent chldren had more one-to-one verbal contact with male peers are not easily integrated into attachment theory because of our limited knowledge regarding the processes by which individuals adapt to disrupted attachment relations beyond infancy. Although findings from studies on both primates (Harlow, 1969) and human children (Freud and Dann, 1951) support the notion that peer attachments can compensate for disrupted primary attachment

relationships, little thought has been given to the possibility that relationships with male peers might compensate for disrupted paternal attachment relationships in single-parent children. Results indicating increased verbal behavior with male peers by both male and female single-parent children are disconcerting, because in order to increase her contact with male peers, the pre-adolescent single-parent female must deviate from the norm of sex cleavage in peer relations. How does she deal with this dilemma and what effect does it have on her psychosexual development? One general question raised by this finding is: What kinds of interpersonal relationships are single-parent children likely to form with their same age male peers? There is a critical need for more information regarding the same-sex and opposite-sex peer interactions of both male and female single-parent children. Data are especially needed on children from other socio-economic backgrounds within a variety of natural settings.

The result indicating that single-parent children who had low amounts of contact with male peers were more likely to be rated as having high Academic Disability, suggest that male peers play an important role in the continuing socialization of single-parent children. How increasing one's contact with male peers might be adaptive for the single-parent child is a question for further research. Further study is needed on the relationship between the ability and/or desire of single-parent children to sustain one-to-one contact with male peers and their general social competency including both peer and family relations and academic performance.

Significant correlations between Academic Disability ratings and one-to-one verbal contact with teachers for two-parent children but not for single-parent children are intriguing in light of the result that single-parent children directed their gaze significantly more toward a teacher during periods of quiet academic work. Interactions between single-parent children and their teachers need to be studied in much greater detail. Are there differences between single- and two-parent children in the manner in which they initiate interactions with teachers, or in how they respond to teachers, or in the content of their conversations with teachers? Information is also needed on the relationship between the teacher's assessment of the single-parent child's academic ability, their subsequent interactions with them and the actual academic performance of single-parent children.

In conclusion, there has been a tendency for researchers to focus on the extra-classroom variables associated with single-parent family life to explain possible differences in the Academic Performance of single- and two-parent children. The results of this study suggest that attention must also be paid to a number of intra-classroom variables and processes such as teacher-child interactions, child-child interactions, and teacher attitudes if we are to gain a better understanding of the relationship between single-parent family life and the educational experiences of single-parent children.

APPENDIX A

BEHAVIORAL CATEGORIES AND SETTING DEFINITIONS

BEHAVIORAL CATEGORIES

GAZE DIRECTION

1. Gaze direction material, head up.
2. Gaze direction material, head down.
3. Gaze direction peer.
4. Gaze direction teacher.
5. Gaze direction, non-specific/other, head up.
6. Gaze direction, non-specific, head down.

PROXEMIC BEHAVIOR

1. Number of male peers within a distance of 1 meter from focal subject, in and out of view.
2. Number of female peers within distance of 1 meter from focal subject, in and out of view.
3. Number of teachers within distance of 1 meter from focal subject, in and out of view.
4. Number of male peers within distance of 1 meter from focal subject, in view only.
5. Number of female peers within distance of 1 meter from focal subject, in view only.
6. Number of teachers within distance of 1 meter from focal subject, in view only.

TACTILE BEHAVIOR

1. Frequency of active touch with a male peer.
2. Frequency of active touch with a female peer.
3. Frequency of passive touch with a male peer.
4. Frequency of passive touch with a female peer.

VERBAL BEHAVIOR

1. Number of short verbal statements (less than 3 words plus longer single statements).
2. Number of times focal subject was engaged in dyadic conversation with a male peer.
3. Number of times focal subject was engaged in dyadic conversation with a female peer.
4. Number of seconds focal subject was engaged in dyadic conversation with a teahcer.
5. Number of seconds focal subject was engaged in dyadic verbal conversation with a male peer.
6. Number of seconds focal subject was engaged in dyadic verbal conversation with a female peer.
7. Number of seconds focal subject was engaged in dyadic verbal conversation with a teacher.
8. Number of seconds focal subject was engaged in a group conversation.

SETTING DEFINITIONS

Setting 1: Location of Patio with Non-academic activity
Setting 2: Location of Rug with Teacher Focus activity
Setting 3: Location of Rug with Single Material activity
Setting 4: Location of Seatwork with Teacher Focus activity
Setting 5: Location of Seatwork with Single Material activity

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